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Atari Online News, Etc.
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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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Spring cannot come quickly enough to make me happy - trust me!! More heavy snows and bitter cold weather continues to batter us here in the Northeast this week. It's almost got to the point where I don't have any place to put more snow, or the strength to get it there if I did!

Forgetting about the chihuahua for a second, my other two dogs don't dare play in the snow because it's too deep for them to move around; and they love going through the snow! It's been like that since just after the holidays. That's how deep the snow is around here! This weekend, I have to try and pull some of the snow off of my roof because of the ice jams; and I'm afraid that there's just too much weight on the roof due to all of the snow. And, if I have any strength left after all of that, I may try to cut down some of the huge piles of snow, if I can figure out where to put it! Just backing out of my driveway is a new adventure, hoping that I spot any oncoming cars before I get hit by one!

And the expense of it all! With all of this bone-chilling cold, we're going through heating oil like some people go through coffee from Starbucks!! In this economy and the high price of heating oil again this year, it's costing us a small fortune every 3-4 weeks, if we're "lucky"! So yes, although I don't mind snow and cold weather as a rule, too much of it is, well, too much! Winter is less than half way gone, but we've had our typical season's worth of cold and snow already. Enough is enough; I've had it!!

Hopefully, by next week, I'll have warmed up and managed to get some rest for my weary bones, but I'm not counting on it. Stay tuned!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Another week has come and gone, and again I misse

d a column. I hate missing columns. The sad truth is that I’m still adjusting to my new schedule. It strikes me as odd that I used to juggle all of these things with ease. Now? I’m lucky if I can wake up on time.

I guess it’s just getting older that’s doing it, but that’s not a big help, really. I mean, it HAS been more than three years since I’ve had a steady job, but it’s also been almost three months since I started my new job, and I’m also working less hours at a less strenuous job... so why can’t I get my act together? Well for now I’m going with the "I’m still getting used to working after a protracted period of joblessness" defense. [grin]

But regardless, I apologize for missing last week’s issue. I hope to be able to get back on schedule and stay there starting now.

Now on to the good stuff... whatever that might be.

Well, to start with, it’s cold here in the northeast. Damned cold. And due to get colder over the next couple of days. I can remember when I was a kid (now I KNOW I’m getting old), and the occasional extra-cold spell meant little more than that we actually wore the itchy woolen caps that we swore to our parents that we wore in the first place.

But now there are other considerations. Will the car start? How much extra is it going to cost to heat the house because of this? What will this do to the landscaping I just spent a fortune on?

Yes, there are other considerations than whether your tongue really will stick to a metal pole out there in this kind of cold (where I grew up, it was the railroad track, but that’s a distinction without a difference for our purposes).

Of course, I’m waiting for those who oppose the idea of global warming to chime in, using this as evidence that global warming doesn’t exist. If you take the narrow, short-range view, yeah, it looks like this flies in the face of the idea of global warming. I mean, you can’t argue with the idea that it’s been abnormally cold for a good part of the winter here in the northeast and other parts of the country. But that ignores not only other countries and continents, but the most important part of all; the oceans.

Yes, the oceans are probably the most important thing to look at when thinking about global warming. Think about it. Water absorbs heat more slowly than dry land does, but it gives up that heat more slowly too. Over and above that, the oceans have one other thing going for them that dry land doesn’t... it moves. There are not only tides, but currents and ’streams’ throughout every ocean on the planet. These currents transport things from one part of the ocean to another... nutrients and food from deep, cold regions of the oceans, for one thing... minerals, plankton, krill, school fish... they all ’catch a ride’ on these currents and end up in a far different place than they could on their own in still water. Now there’s another thing that these currents move too... heat.

The sun beats down more strongly at the equator and heats the water there more thoroughly than at higher latitudes. The heat itself helps the currents move north or south from the equator, bringing warm, nutrient-rich water throughout the world. But now, with more heat ’available’ all over the world due to greenhouse emissions and such, it’s kind of like a perpetual motion machine where the faster you go, the faster you CAN go. The heat just builds up and builds up, carried north and south on the currents. And that’s fine.. its what keeps large portions of the oceans from freezing solid.

But now there’s a catch. That warm water is a lot warmer than it used to be. Sure, it may not sound like much when we’re talking about a degree or half a degree

, but think about how much ocean is out there. If you imagine the entire surface of the ocean to a depth of even only a few inches and figure out how much 'extra' heat is contained in that volume, you'll be not just amazed but worried. And remember: Heat is energy. And energy hates being pent-up in a single place. The one 'urge' of energy is to spread out and 'equalize'. What that means is that even water that's only a half a degree warmer than it used to be can have an effect on... everything. Everything from coastal wildlife to the glaciers of Greenland and the northern polar ice cap.

Yeah, see? And if that's not bad enough, here's another easter egg for the geeks out there. Ice reflects sunlight much more efficiently than the dark waters of the open ocean. And what does that mean, boys and girls? That's right... open water absorbs heat, ice reflects it. So again we see the thing I was talking about before; this time, let's call it the "the more you warm, the more you can warm" thing. The more ice that melts makes it easier to melt more ice.

Now, I don't think anybody's sure (and I KNOW I'm not), but if the northern and southern ocean's icy coverings melt and the water that replaces them absorbs more heat, it might possibly 'shut down' the currents that transfer all that good stuff (including food and nutrients and heat). What we could end up with is huge 'dead zones' in the ocean. The ocean is where most of this planet's oxygen comes from, so... well, you do the math.

But it doesn't stop there. There are probably dozens of things that can go on once things are set in motion, and they set other things in motion.

So what point am I making? None really, except that sometimes things happen that you either can't foresee or don't want to face.

Well, that's about it for this week, friends and neighbors. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Sony Unveils New 'NGP' Portable!
"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" Hot "Brink" and "Rage" Set!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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Sony Unveils New 'NGP' Portable Game Console

Japanese entertainment giant Sony on Thursday unveiled a new portable touchscree
n gaming console as it looks to launch a fresh challenge to Nintendo and Apple i
n the competitive mobile gaming market.

At a special media event in Tokyo, Sony also unveiled a "Suite"
application for older PlayStation games, allowing them to be played on
mobile phones and tablet computers running Google’s Android operating
system.

The device, codenamed "Next Generation Portable" will succeed Sony’s
PlayStation Portable handheld device and boasts 3G mobile connectivity
and WiFi, allowing users to download games and other content, said Kazuo
Hirai, president and group chief executive of Sony Computer Entertainment.

The NGP features a five-inch organic light-emitting diode (OLED)
touchscreen, a GPS receiver, a motion sensor and a rear panel touchpad
to control certain actions, as well as navigation buttons and a joystick.

Software titles will be available on a small, flash-based memory card,
Sony said.

The device will also incorporate front and back cameras and gyroscopic
controls.

Sony said the device would be available by the end of 2011, entering the
market ahead of the key holiday shopping season. It did not indicate a
price.

The Japanese giant’s PSP Go, launched in November 2009, already features
software downloads through a wireless connection, allowing players to
also browse the Internet, watch movies, play music and read books and
comics.

Its gaming rival Nintendo is also set to introduce its new 3DS handheld
device next month which allows users to play 3D videogames without the
need for special glasses, the first major game machine to do so.

"NGP has fascinating new features, such as a touch panel on the
backside, which would be enough to differentiate itself from rival game
consoles," said Hiroshi Sakai, an analyst at SMBC Friend Securities.

"It’s easy to try to compare NGP to Nintendo’s 3DS, but they have earned
two different customer groups already. Sony has earned serious game fans
by providing sophisticated consoles."

Sony sold nearly 65 million PSPs as of the end of September 2010, but
the device has been overshadowed by the popularity of Nintendo’s DS,
which has sold at least double that since its release the same year.

Sony’s move comes as smartphones and tablet computers such as Apple’s
iPhone and iPad take a growing share of the market for portable gaming
devices on to which high quality games can be easily downloaded and
played in minutes.

The PlayStation Suite, an application for Google’s Android market that
will run videogames of older PlayStation console quality, will be
available later this year.

Hot "Brink" and "Rage" Videogames Set for Release

The studio behind blockbuster videogame franchise "Fallout" on Thursday announced that eagerly anticipated new "Brink" and "Rage" titles would be unleashed by mid-year.

A first-person "Brink" shooter game, set in a near-future with a society stressed by too many people and too few resources, will debut in North America on May 17 and in Europe on May 20, according to Bethesda Softworks.

Early kudos being heaped on "Brink" include being crowned "Game of Show" at the Eurogamer Expo where it was previewed last year.

The weaponry-rich title crafted by Splash Damage for Bethesda boasts innovative controls and a smooth blend of single- and multi-player action as gamers increasingly turn to playing with others using Internet connections.

A "Rage" first-person shooter videogame made by renowned developer id Software with be available in North America on September 13 and in Europe three days later.

"Rage" was rated "Best Overall Game" at last year's major Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) in Los Angeles.

Bethesda promised "Rage" will feature intense action, "breakneck vehicle combat, an expansive world to explore and jaw-dropping graphics."

The ZeniMax Media company said that a "Hunted" fantasy action title with a fresh take on "classic dungeon crawl" style games will be released in North America and Europe the first week of June.

A new installment to Bethesda's fantasy epic franchise "The Elder Scrolls" will launch worldwide launch on November 11.

"We are particularly excited to present such a diverse lineup of high quality titles," said Bethesda president Vlatko Andonov. "2011 will be a great year for gamers."

The games are being released for PC users as well as for the Microsoft Xbox 360 and Sony PlayStation3 consoles.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

The Day Part of the Internet Died: Egypt Goes Dark

About a half-hour past midnight Friday morning in Egypt, the Internet went dead.

Almost simultaneously, the handful of companies that pipe the Internet into and out of Egypt went dark as protesters were gearing up for a fresh round of demonstrations calling for the end of President Hosni Mubarak’s nearly 30-year rule, experts said.

Egypt has apparently done what many technologists thought was unthinkable for any country with a major Internet economy: It unplugged itself entirely from the Internet to try and silence dissent.

Experts say it’s unlikely that what’s happened in Egypt could happen in the United States because the U.S. has numerous Internet providers and ways of connecting to the Internet. Coordinating a simultaneous shutdown would be a massive undertaking.

"It can’t happen here," said Jim Cowie, the chief technology officer and a co-founder of Renesys, a network security firm in Manchester, N.H., that studies Internet disruptions. "How many people would you have to call to shut down the U.S. Internet? Hundreds, thousands maybe? We have enough Internet here that we can have our own Internet. If you cut it off, that leads to a philosophical question: Who got cut off from the Internet, us or the rest of the world?"

In fact, there are few countries anywhere with all their central Internet connections in one place or so few places that they can be severed at the same time. But the idea of a single "kill switch" to turn the Internet on and off has seduced some American lawmakers, who have pushed for the power to shutter the Internet in a national emergency.

The Internet blackout in Egypt shows that a country with strong control over its Internet providers apparently can force all of them to pull their plugs at once, something that Cowie called "almost entirely unprecedented in Internet history."

The outage sets the stage for blowback from the international community and investors. It also sets a precedent for other countries grappling with paralyzing political protests - though censoring the Internet and tampering with traffic to quash protests is nothing new.

China has long restricted what its people can see online and received renewed scrutiny for the practice when Internet search leader Google Inc. proclaimed a year ago that it would stop censoring its search results in China.

In 2009, Iran disrupted Internet service to try to curb protests over disputed elections. And two years before that, Burma’s Internet was crippled when military leaders apparently took the drastic step of physically disconnecting primary communications links in major cities, a tactic that was foiled by activists armed with cell phones and satellite links.

Computer experts say what sets Egypt’s action apart is that the entire country was disconnected in an apparently coordinated effort, and that all manner of devices are affected, from mobile phones to laptops. It seems, though, that satellite phones would not be affected.

"Iran never took down any significant portion of their Internet connection - they knew their economy and the markets are dependent on Internet activity," Cowie said.

When countries are merely blocking certain sites - like Twitter or Facebook - where protesters are coordinating demonstrations, as apparently happened at first in Eqypt, protesters can use "proxy" computers to circumvent the government censors. The proxies "anonymize" traffic and bounce it to computers in other countries that send it along to the restricted sites.

But when there's no Internet at all, proxies can't work and online communication grinds to a halt.

Renesys' network sensors showed that Egypt's four primary Internet providers - Link Egypt, Vodafone/Raya, Telecom Egypt, Etisalat Misr - and all went dark at 12:34 a.m. Those companies shuttle all Internet traffic into and out of Egypt, though many people get their service through additional local providers with different names.

Italy-based Seabone said no Internet traffic was going into or out of Egypt after 12:30 a.m. local time.

"There's no way around this with a proxy," Cowie said. "There is literally no route. It's as if the entire country disappeared. You can tell I'm still kind of stunned."

The technical act of turning off the Internet can be fairly straightforward. It likely requires only a simple change to the instructions for the companies' networking equipment.

Craig Labovitz, chief scientist for Arbor Networks, a Chelmsford, Mass., security company, said that in countries such as Egypt - with a centralized government and a relatively small number of fiber-optic cables and other ways for the Internet to get piped in - the companies that own the technologies are typically under strict licenses from the government.

"It's probably a phone call that goes out to half a dozen folks who enter a line on a router configuration file and hit return," Labovitz said. "It's like programming your TiVo - you have things that are set up and you delete one. It's not high-level programming."

Twitter confirmed Tuesday that its service was being blocked in Egypt, and Facebook reported problems.

"Iran went through the same pattern," Labovitz said. "Initially there was some level of filtering, and as things deteriorated, the plug was pulled. It looks like Egypt might be following a similar pattern."

The ease with which Egypt cut itself also means the country can control where the outages are targeted, experts said. So its military facilities, for example, can stay online while the Internet vanishes for everybody else.

Experts said it was too early to tell which, if any, facilities still have connections in Egypt.

Cowie said his firm is investigating clues that a small number of small networks might still be available.

Meanwhile, a program Renesys uses that displays the percentage of each country that is connected to the Internet was showing a figure that he was still struggling to believe. Zero.

Firefox, Google Chrome Adding "Do Not Track" Tools

The Firefox and Google Chrome browsers are getting tools to help users block advertisers from collecting information about them.

Alex Fowler, a technology and privacy officer for Firefox maker Mozilla, said the "Do Not Track" tool will be the first in a series of steps designed to guard privacy. He didn’t say when the tool will be available.

Google Chrome users can now download a browser plug-in that blocks advertisers - but only from ad networks that already let people decline personalized, targeted ads. According to Google Inc., these include the top 15 advertising networks, as rated by the research group comScore, a group that includes AOL Inc., Yahoo Inc. and Google itself.

The next version of Microsoft Corp.’s Internet Explorer browser, which is still being developed, will include a similar feature, though people will have to create or find their own lists of sites they want to block.

Google and Mozilla, however, are developing tracking-protection tools that will work automatically - once people decide to turn on that privacy feature, that is.

Microsoft, Google and Mozilla’s promises of stronger privacy comes on the heels of government complaints that online advertisers are able to collect too much data about people in their quest to target ads.

Last month, the Federal Trade Commission recommended the creation of a "Do Not Track" tool that would invite consumers to restrict advertisers from collecting information about them, including the websites they visit, the links they click, their Internet searches and their online purchases.

Meanwhile, the Commerce Department last month called for guidelines that would require online advertisers to warn consumers what information about them they are collecting and how they plan to use it. Consumers, the department said, should be able to "opt out," or decline, some or all of that data collection. And if companies do collect information, they would be required to store it securely.

Google product managers Sean Harvey and Rajas Moonka said the new Chrome tool will allow for more permanent ad blocking. Before, opt-out settings were typically stored through small files known as cookies; when users clear cookies, however, the opt-out settings get erased, too. Another benefit is that the new tool allows users to opt out of all participating ad networks at once, rather than one at a time.

Google eventually hopes to develop a similar plug-in for other browsers as well, Harvey and Moonka added.

Headless Conficker Worm Lives in Computers

A unified effort has lopped the head off a treacherous Conficker computer worm b

ut the malicious computer code lives on in infected machines.

A Conficker Working Group report available online on Tuesday said the alliance has prevented the people who released the worm from using it to command computers as an army of machines referred to as a "botnet."

"Nearly every person interviewed for this report said this aspect of the effort has been successful," the group said in a summary of its findings.

The group considered is biggest failure as "the inability to remediate infected computers and eliminate the threat of the botnet."

Despite efforts to eradicate Conficker, variations of the worm remain on more than five million computers, according to the report.

Conficker was first noticed "in the wild" in November of 2008 and spread quickly to computers around the world.

The worm, a self-replicating program, took advantage of networks or computers that weren’t up to date with security patches for Windows operating software.

It was able to infect machines from the Internet or by hiding on USB memory sticks carrying data from one computer to another.

"Conficker is among the largest botnets in the past five years," the report said. "It combined a number of the best tricks and traps within malware."

Conficker was designed to let cybercriminals take control of computers, perhaps to steal valuable data or use machines to fire off spam or launch attacks on websites or other online targets.

A task force assembled by Microsoft has been working to stamp out Conficker, also referred to as DownAdUp, and the software colossus placed a bounty of 250,000 dollars on the heads of those responsible for the threat.

The author of Conficker has not been caught, but hints in the code have led some researchers to suspect the culprit lived in Eastern Europe.

The Conficker Working Group has been touted as a powerful example of the importance of having traditionally rival computer security and software firms unite to battle hackers.

The group said it thwarted the hackers behind Conficker by working with the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) to cut the worm off from "command and control" online domains where it could download orders.

"Some suggested that the author may never have intended to utilize Conficker and the entire botnet was a feint or a ’head-fake,’ " the report said.

"It is likely that the Conficker Working Group effort to counter the spread did make it more difficult for the author to act with impunity, but the author did not seem to have tried his or her hardest."

The attention focused on Conficker might have spooked the cyber criminals, or they may have been waiting for someone to pay to use the

botnet in a nefarious take on offering services in the Internet "cloud," the report said.

"In many ways, Conficker did serve as a test run for the cybersecurity community to learn where their strengths and weaknesses were," the report concluded.

The Working Group was hailed as "evidence that differences can be overcome to cooperate against a threat."

The list of group members included Microsoft, Facebook, AOL, Cisco, IBM, VeriSign, ICANN, and a host of computer security firms.

Mark Zuckerberg’s Facebook Page Hacked

A cheeky hacker got a hold of the Mark Zuckerberg fan page on Facebook and decided it was time to poke a little fun at Zuck and his cash-saturated social network. The sneaky critic posted a message that appeared to come directl y from the CEO on the page.

> Let the hacking begin: If facebook needs money, instead of going to the banks, why doesn’t Facebook let its users invest in Facebook in a social way? Why not transform Facebook into a ’social business’ the way Nobel Price winner Muhammad Yunus described it? http://bit.ly/fs6rT3 What do you think? #hackercup2011

For those unaware a "social business" strives not to make money for its investor s, but to achieve goals such as healthcare for the poor or sheltering the homeless with any profits made. Now we’re not saying that Zuck doesn’t have a philanthropic bone in his body, just that perhaps his primar y investors (which include Goldman Sachs and Russian oligarch Alisher Usmanov) might expect a return on their investment beyond the warm and fuzzy feeling one gets for doing the right thing. On the plus side, maybe now Mark Zuckerberg will take the privacy and security concerns of users seriously.

The Tax Spam Cometh

It is that time of the year again: time to wait anxiously for W2s and 1099s to arrive, then feverishly compile figures and look for deductions to try and get back as much of your money from the IRS - or Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs (HMRC) - as possible. Do you know what that means? That means it is also time for attackers to capitalize on tax season with malwar e and phishing scams.

In the United States, we have an extra few days to drag out tax season before the final deadline at midnight on April 18. It was delayed this year because...well, no reason really. I guess the IRS and the post office didn’t want to work late on Friday? But, for my friends across the pond in the United Kingdom, the HMRC deadline is midnight on this coming Monday, January 31 - so, let the games begin!

Phishing e-mails are circulating, claiming that a miscalculation has been detect ed and that the recipient is owed a larger refund. Fred Touchette of Appriver ex

plains the new tax season threat. "The scammers see this as an opportunity to po ssibly catch some people slipping even though this most recent scam is targeting people who are already expecting a refund.

To obtain the increased refund, recipients are directed to open the e-mail file attachment titled "Tax.Refund.New.Message.Alert.HTML." The resulting Web page appears to be the actual HMRC site, but is actually generated locally. The form requests sensitive information such as credit card details and mother's maiden name in order to process the refund.

Touchette provides further details of the attack. "Once the information is entered, some javascript runs to make sure that the information entered matches proper formats required such as date structure and known credit card algorithms, and once this test is passed, the info is shipped off to the attackers and the victims are redirected to the actual HM Revenue & Customs website hopefully in their eyes, none the wiser."

While this attack is specific to the United Kingdom, there will be others - both in Europe and in the United States. I realize it is difficult not to get excite d, or at least be a little curious, when you receive an e-mail claiming you are owed money, but these tax spam phishing attacks are no better t han e-mails from exiled Nigerian princes offering you millions. The only differe nce is that the amount of money is a more reasonable - hence, more believable - figure aimed at catching even skeptical victims with their guard down.

UK Police Arrest WikiLeaks Backers for Web Attacks

British police arrested five young men on Thursday as they and U.S. authorities conducted searches as part of a probe into Internet activists who carried out cyber attacks against groups they viewed as enemies of the WikiLeaks website.

"The arrests were related to recent 'distributed denial of service' (DDoS) attacks by an online group calling themselves Anonymous," London police said in a statement.

In the United States, the Federal Bureau of Investigation said that agents execu ted more than 40 search warrants as part of its investigation and that the attac ks were facilitated by software the group made available for free on the Internet.

"The FBI is working closely with its international law enforcement partners and others to mitigate these threats," the agency said in a statement, adding that there were other, unspecified investigative and enforcement actions in the Netherlands, Germany and France.

WikiLeaks, which was founded by Australian-born Julian Assange, has disclosed classified U.S. diplomatic dispatches which included candid and embarrassing assessments of world leaders as well as classified documents related to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In addition to the probe into the cyber attacks, U.S. authorities have been investigating the leak of the documents themselves and their prime suspect has been a former U.S. Army intelligence analyst, Bradley Manning.

Internet activists last month carried out a series of online assaults against institutions they viewed as enemies of WikiLeaks, temporarily bringing down the websites of credit-card giants Visa and MasterCard, Amazon.com and of the Swedish government.

Sweden wants Assange extradited from Britain so he can answer questions over sexual assault allegations.

Officers from a specialist London police unit dealing with online crime detained the five males, aged from 15 to 26, in raids at homes in central and southern England.

Dutch police last month arrested two teenagers suspected of involvement in the online campaign. They face trial later this year.

A DDoS attack consists of swamping the resources of a computer such as a server to make it unavailable to users.

The maximum penalty in Britain for offences of computer misuse is 10 years imprisonment and a fine of 5,000 pounds ($7,953).

In the United States, such a cyber attack carries a maximum punishment of 10 years in prison and significant fines.

Macworld Opens for Second Year Without Apple

An annual trade show for Apple aficionados is now open to the public.

Macworld Expo, which is held at San Francisco’s Moscone Center, is a showcase for companies that make software, protective cases and other accessories for Apple Inc.’s Mac computers, iPods, the iPhone and the iPad.

In past years, Apple CEO Steve Jobs used the Macworld stage to unveil some of the company’s most important products, including the first iPhone in 2007. But Apple stopped attending the show starting last year, preferring to host its own media events instead.

Apple hasn’t announced a second-generation iPad yet. But some vendors are Macworld are already producing cases for iPads with cameras and a bigger speaker, one of the anticipated features for the next model.

Macworld runs Thursday to Saturday.

The State of Windows 8

Only Microsoft knows how the next version of its Windows operating system will l ook and what it will be called, but big changes could be ahead for the OS that observers refer to as "Windows 8."

At this year’s Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, Microsoft announced that Windows 8 will support system-on-a-chip architectures using ARM processors. Unlike the x86 architecture that today’s Windows laptops and desktops work with, ARM-based chips tend to run such low-power devices as tablets

and smartphones.

In his CES keynote speech, Microsoft CEO Steve Ball›mer said, "This announcement is really all about enabling a new class of hardware, and new silicon partners for Windows, to bring the widest possible range of form factors to the market."

In other words, Windows won't be just for laptops and desktops anymore.

Microsoft's ARM announcement represents the firm's only officially released factual detail about Windows 8. Consistent with it, the company named Nvidia, Qualcomm, and Texas Instruments as silicon partners, so Windows devices built upon their three low-power platforms are likely.

At an architectural summit in London last year, Microsoft en››couraged the idea of virtualizing Windows more heavily, possibly storing apps, data, Windows settings, and parts of the OS itself in the cloud.

No rumor about Windows 8 is more precise than a series of leaked slides that supposedly provide a blueprint for Microsoft's next OS. The slides alone don't indicate final features of Windows 8, but they do show where Microsoft is headed, especially since other reports have corroborated them.

One slide, for example, talks about an OS that follows users wherever they go; instead of being tethered to hardware, users may roam between desktops, laptops, and tablets in whatever way is most convenient.

Another slide speaks of a reset button that preserves apps and settings while wiping out viruses and other hindrances. Some industry watchers suggest that storing apps and data in the cloud could make this feature possible.

As for Microsoft's goal of "instant on" computing, blogger Manan Kakkar spotted a Microsoft patent for using a hypervisor-another virtualization method- to split the operating system into a general-purpose OS and a number of appliancelike applications, such as for TVs and tablets. Those uses, K akkar says, could switch on instantly even if the core OS took 30 seconds to start up.

How will Microsoft achieve these lightweight versions of its operating system? A ru››mor circulated by Paul Thurrott posits that Windows 8 will introdu ce a tile-based interface called "Mosh" to serve as an alternative UI for tablets and other low-power touchscreen devices.

We've also heard rumblings about a new application development framework code-na med "Jupiter," whose goal is to help developers create dynamic, visually appeali ng, and immersive applications for a forthcoming Windows app store. It may also be an attempt by Microsoft to enable developers to create apps that work on both traditional x86-based CPUs and ARM-based processors with out extensive recompiling and reprogramming.

If you doubt whether Windows 8 will be a profoundly different operating system from its predecessors, consider this breathless bit of hype that briefly appeared on a Microsoft developer's blog in 2009:

"The minimum that folks can take for granted is that the next version will be something completely different from what folks usually expect of Windows...The themes that have been floated truly reflect what people

have been looking [for] for years and it will change the way people think about PCs and the way they use them. It is the future of PCs."

Microsoft quickly removed the blog, as if to erase the evidence. So is the company really trying to shake things up with Windows 8?

Microsoft clearly wants to create an operating system that scales between devices. ARM support provides the foundation, and cloud services could be a major building block. The challenge for Microsoft will be to leave the core Windows experience and legacy compatibility intact while also pursuing its lofty ambitions.

A final rumor: Reportedly, Microsoft is targeting a 2012 release for Windows 8. Think the company can get everything figured out by then?

Microsoft Sued Over Refunds on Windows Copies

A class action lawsuit against Microsoft has been filed in Italy by a group clai ming that it’s too difficult to procure a refund for the copies of Windows that come bundled in new PCs.

The case, which was filed in Milan by the Associazione per i Diritti degli Utent i e Consumatori (ADUC), and picked up by The Register earlier today, points to M icrosoft’s end user license agreement (EULA) - as outlined in various copies of Windows - noting that once users turn their computer on and begin to use it, they are no longer able to return the software for a refund.

Furthermore, the group says consumers who buy computers with OEM copies of Windo ws installed have more difficulties in getting a refund than those who purchased a retail copy of the OS. The lawsuit notes that users who buy and install the O S itself, but that don’t agree to the EULA, are entitled to a return from the pl ace where they bought it. OEM buyers, however, are at the whim of their system s eller or installer for a refund, which has historically proven to be a difficult process, it says.

To avail these issues, the class action suit seeks a hearing and also to nullify the section of the EULA that requires users go to OEMs instead of Microsoft for refunds.

Is AOL Scamming Old People?

The decline and fall of AOL is one of the great stories of the digital age. At its peak, AOL was a subscription service and Internet gateway for more than 35 million Americans. Then the Web took off, telcos started delivering broadband services, and AOL got left with the ruins off its ill-considered marriage to Time Warner. Today, AOL has just 4 million subscribers. But here is the kicker - those people are still paying.

AOL.com, of course, is free. It used to be a pay service, but has been free for years. You can access the AOL.com, read all of its content, and check your aol.com email without paying a dime. If you already pay for an account, however, AOL will continue to bill you. And evidently, that

makes AOL a LOT of money.

The New Yorker's Ken Auletta did a profile of AOL's CEO Tim Armstrong this week and it includes the following whopper:

'[M]any of [AOL's subscribers] are older people who have cable or DSL service but don't realize that they need not pay an additional twenty-five dollars a month to get online and check their email. "The dirty little secret," a former AOL executive says, "is that seventy-five per cent of the people who subscribe to AOL's dial-up service don't need it"'

Setting aside the ageist overtones, the implication here is that a large number of AOL subscribers are already paying their phone company or cable provider for Internet access. That inevitably comes with both full access to the Web, an email address, and even the opportunity to register for an AOL.com account. So there is no need to pay for an AOL subscription. And yet people still do, perhaps because they don't realize they don't have to.

What's more, Auletta estimates that these subscriber revenues generate 80% of the AOL's profit. How much is that? In the third quarter of last year these suspect subs generated about $244 million! All because AOL subscribers don't know they don't have to pay anymore

Now, I have to confess, I still have an AOL.com email address. I signed onto the service in the early 90s and actually used the email as my primary email address well into my time working at PCMag.com. This, of course, was soundly mocked by my geeky co-workers. After all, even then, AOL was for geezers. It was a Disney-fied online experience that any technology journalist would be embarrassed to put on their business card. And yet, I had had the address for years and liked it - no numbers! And it was nice to have a dial-up account as a back-up connection. And it was handy when I travelled, lots of local access number. But that was 10 years ago.

Now I just have the whole spammy mess forwarded to my Gmail account and dumped into a filter for safe-keeping.

Auletta says AOL is losing about 30% of its subscribers each year, but that means that 70% will continue to pay. People, it is time for the madness to stop. You read PCMag, so you already know all this of course, but chances are you know someone who might be among that sad, sorry 4 million that is paying every month for something they don't need. Forward them this story and tell them to go here to cancel their AOL account.

And let them know they don't need to pay for email anymore.

Holocaust Historical Data Goes Digital

The world's largest collection of Holocaust documents is going digital.

Israel's Holocaust memorial, Yad Vashem, is teaming up with Google to make its photographs and documents interactive and searchable on the Internet. The first 130,000 photos hit the web Wednesday.

Although much of Yad Vashem’s archive was already available through its formidable website, the new project enables users to search keywords and data just like a Google search.

A social network-like component allows viewers to contribute to the project by adding their own stories, comments and documents about family members who appear in the online archives.

Yad Vashem Chairman Avner Shalev said even though that feature could be misused to post anti-Semitic comments, the risk is outweighed by the benefit provided to future generations seeking information about their ancestors.

"This is part of our vision - to connect Yad Vashem’s knowledge and information to modern technology, and bring it to youngsters," he said.

The project started three years ago in the Tel Aviv skyscraper that houses Google’s research operations in Israel. It was inspired by a Google initiative encouraging employees to spend 20 percent of work time on projects they feel are important.

Google used experimental optical character recognition technology to make text within documents and photos searchable in multiple languages.

The move is just the latest in Yad Vashem’s digital outreach. Earlier this week, the memorial launched a version of its YouTube channel in Farsi to educate the country’s most bitter enemy - Iran - about the Nazi genocide of 6 million Jews.

Yad Vashem’s next priority is to digitize its collection of survivor testimonies.

The launch comes a day before the U.N. marks its annual Holocaust remembrance day.

Is This the Beginning of the End For Web Mail?

The number of people accessing Web-based e-mail sites such as Hotmail and Gmail

is in decline, according to new research from ComScore. Comparing November 2010 to 2009, the research firm found six percent fewer visitors arrived at webmail sites. Not only that but those who visited spent just under 10 percen t less time there compared to previous years.

Could the Web mail cloud be dissipating as quickly as it formed? Perhaps not, but the signs are not good for those who’ve been enjoying the high-quality free services offered by corporates such as Google and Microsoft. A s usage patterns change, the tech giants are going to try harder and harder to squeeze money out of us.

The visitor drop was even steeper for teenage users between 12 and 17 years old; 24 percent fewer of them visited in November 2010 compared with the same time the previous year. Their engagement figure - the amount of time spent on the site measured in minutes and pages visited - dropped by half.

Teens give a clue as to what might be partially to blame: Messaging

services built into social networking sites. Teens spend so long on Facebook that it becomes an "Internet shell" and they rarely wander beyond its w alls. Switching to a different site just to send a message is cumbersome. Facebo ok's mail service isn't perfect but it's good enough for light use (although thi ngs are set to improve.

For groups usually excluded from social networking because of their age, Web e-mail showed the kind of growth that we might otherwise have expected: Of those aged over age 55, there was a rise of 16 percent in terms of visitors compared with 2009. Of those aged over 65, there was an 8 percent rise.

The biggest threat comes from mobile devices, however. The survey recorded 36 percent growth in mobile device e-mail access. However, it isn't clear how the e-mail is being delivered - whether push services or simple POP3 was in use, for example, or even if the mobile sites for Web mail services were being utilized.

However, the executive summary is this: Things are changing in the world of e-mail, and we could be in for the biggest shakeup since the launch of Web mail itself, back in 1996 when Hotmail came online. The decline in visito rs to Web-based e-mail sites won't have gone unnoticed.

Users may not come out of it well. At the moment we get an astonishing amount for nothing. Gmail offers ad-free messages, POP3/IMAP access so e-mail can be grabbed via any e-mail client, insane amounts of storage, plus various bells and whistles that make using it a dream.

As users, all that's required of us is to gaze incidentally at ads here and there, and sometimes click them if we find them interesting. Whether Gmail (or Hotmail for that matter) actually makes any money this way is a moot point. We're still in the hazy, crazy days of the Internet's teenage years; don't kill the buzz by asking questions!

Yet it's important at least to try and make money, which is why there are ads. However, if people aren't seeing them because they're using every other method of grabbing mail rather than the Website, then this might make somebody at the increasingly bureaucratic Google start to panic.

People who panic do silly things, and we can imagine what could happen: Ads in messages, limitations on the number messages downloaded via POP3/IMAP, "upgrade" fees for additional functionality, and so on. Microsoft would be doing that kind of thing right now with Hotmail if it wasn't for Google providing competition.

The big problem looming on the horizon is that mobile technology is very resistant to advertising.

A small screen size makes it unforgivable to slip a banner in here or there, for example. Pop-up ads are impossible. The only route would be intrusive ads that users tend to hate - gateway ads that have to be cleared before the user progresses to the content, for example, or adding advertising to content without the user's permission.

No doubt Facebook will be giggling with glee at such attempts, having tied its own forthcoming messaging service into a larger product that offers all kinds of additional value points and already has an unobtrusive ad system in place. Indeed, as the likes of Google Wave have proven, the way forward may be to extend e-mail beyond mere messages. Yet Google has had little success.

ComScore is quick to point out in its survey that e-mail is still one of the most popular online services, reaching 70 percent of the US population each month. There's certainly an undying thirst out there for e-mail, but how the IT giants satiate our desires is set to change as time goes on.

Google Starts Censoring BitTorrent, RapidShare and More

It's taken a while, but Google has finally caved in to pressure from the enterta inment industries including the MPAA and RIAA. The search engine now actively ce nsors terms including BitTorrent, torrent, utorrent, RapidShare and Megaupload f rom its instant and autocomplete services. The reactions from affected companies and services are not mild, with BitTorrent Inc., RapidSh are and Vodo all speaking out against this act of commercial censorship.

google censorshipThe entertainment industries' quest to root out piracy on the I nternet has yet again resulted in commercial censorship. A few weeks ago Google announced that it would start filtering 'piracy related' terms from i ts 'Autocomplete' and 'Instant' services and today they quietly rolled out this questionable feature.

Without a public notice Google has compiled a seemingly arbitrary list of keywor ds for which auto-complete is no longer available. Although the impact of this decision does not currently affect full search results, it does s end out a strong signal that Google is willing to censor its services proactively, and to an extent that is far greater than many expected.

Among the list of forbidden keywords are 'uTorrent', a hugely popular piece of e ntirely legal software and 'BitTorrent', a file transfer protocol and the name of San Fransisco based company BitTorrent Inc. As of today, these keywo rds will no longer be suggested by Google when you type in the first letter, nor will they show up in Google Instant.

All combinations of the word 'torrent' are also completely banned. This means that 'Ubuntu torrent' will not be suggested as a user types in Ubuntu, and the same happens to every other combination ending in the word torre nt. This of course includes the titles of popular films and music albums, which is the purpose of Google's banlist.

TorrentFreak contacted BitTorrent Inc. for a reaction, and Simon Morris told TorrentFreak that he believes the scope of this filter is too broad.

"We respect Google's right to determine algorithms to deliver appropriate search results to user requests. That being said, our company's trademarked name is fa irly unique, and we're pretty confident that anyone typing the first six or seve n letters deserves the same easy access to results as with any other company sea rch," Morris said.

"A quick search for 'BitTorrent' currently returns a variety of legitimate and u seful links, including company information, our software, our open-source protoc ol, and more. What Google may not realize is that our technology is used for many purposes that provide significant value to the techn ology industry, companies, artists and consumers at large," he added.

What is most surprising about the new filter is that the keywords appear to be p icked arbitrarily. It includes BitTorrent clients such as uTorrent and Xunlei, b

ut not BitComet and Vuze. While cyberlockers such as RapidShare and Megaupload a re banned, prominent sites such as 4shared, HotFile and MediaFire are not.

In addition, all the names of popular torrent sites including The Pirate Bay are not included in Google's banlist either. BitTorrent's Simon Morris agree s that this is odd, to say the least.

"There's no reason for Google to throttle search results for our trademarks, inc luding BitTorrent, µTorrent and torrent. Indeed, they do still enable autocomple te for many third-party clients that use the BitTorrent protocol, including BitC omet, BitLord, and even sites like The Pirate Bay and Isohunt."

Morris further points out that the inclusion of Xunlei is a little hypocritical since Google is one of the investors in the Chinese BitTorrent client.

"We'd also like to point out that while Google doesn't enable autocomplete for X unlei (China's largest software client that uses the BitTorrent protocol) Google did invest $5 million in the company in 2006, according to reports," Morris say s, adding, "We sincerely hope Google will recognize the value of BitTorrent and reevaluate this decision expeditiously."

RapidShare is not pleased with Google's new filter either, at least not with its current scope in today's roll-out.

"We knew about Google's plans for quite a few weeks now. We embrace that certain search suggestions will not put a wrong complexion on RapidShare anymore, but w e are concerned that at the same time the legitimate interests of our users will also be affected. We believe it was the wrong decisi on to remove the term 'RapidShare' from the search suggestions," RapidShare told TorrentFreak.

"RapidShare is one of the most popular websites worldwide. Every day hundreds of thousands of users rely on our services to pursue their perfectly legitimate interests. That is why Google has obviously gone too far with censoring the results of its suggest algorithm. A search engine's resul ts should reflect the users' interests and not Google's or anybody else's," the company added.

Indeed, RapidShare has certainly touched a nerve here. It is clear that this filter is the result of pressure from the entertainment industries, which i s not at all in the interests of users. Now that Google has begun proactively ce nsoring their services for commercial reasons, more companies will demand the same. At the same time, the entertainment industries w ill continue to pressure Google to go even further, and censor the actual search results.

Apparently Google has decided that its users should not be searching for the keyword BitTorrent, so why list any results then? It's the beginning of the end.

Jamie King, the founder of Vodo - a platform where artists can share their work with million of people at no cost - agrees with this assessment. Searching for o ne of their perfectly legal releases on Google used to suggest the word 'torrent' with a link to the download page, but not anymore.

"Google already showed it will censor for the highest bidder - China Inc. spring s to mind. Now it's doing it for MPAA & Co.," King told TorrentFreak.

"I guess it’s simple: our favorite search monopoly cares less about helping the thousands of independent creators who use BitTorrent to distribute legal, free-to-share content than they do about protecting the interests of Big Media in its death throes."

Indeed, Google is going down the wrong path by willingly and broadly censoring its services to please a few big companies. This is not the way to get rid of piracy, it’s the way to a corporate controlled Internet. Google may have been proud to leave China because of its political censorship, but it should be ashamed of promoting commercial censorship worldwide.

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